DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 576 SO 028 727

TITLE	How To Help Children Become Geographically Literate.
INSTITUTION	National Council for Geographic Education.
PUB DATE	1994-00-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Council for Geographic Education, 16A Leonard Hall, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705-1087.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Caregivers; Elementary Education; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Geographic Concepts; *Geography Instruction; *Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS	*Geographic Literacy

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet suggests ways in which families and caregivers can work with children to help them learn more about the world in which we live. The pamphlet is intended to help children expand their awareness of the world around them. The article explains why it is important to learn geography, relates how a parent or caregiver can help in the process of improving geographical literacy, relates maps and globes to current events, and suggests ways to make geography a family activity by linking it to the local community and to pen pals, and advocating an active interest in geography instruction in the schools. (EH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 420 576

How to Help Children

Become Geographically Literate

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Ruth I. Shirey

SO 028 727

National Council
for
Geographic Education

National Council
for
Geographic Education

How to Help Children Become Geographically Literate

Dear Family:

This pamphlet suggests ways in which families and caregivers may work with children to help them learn about the world in which we all live.

Some of the suggestions in this pamphlet may seem more suited to your needs than others. We suggest that you select those that have the greatest appeal for the children with whom you are working. Children develop map reading and spatial skills at different rates. Some do this early and almost by instinct, while others develop these abilities later and need help from those around them in order to do so. With your help and a little patience, your child can acquire a basic knowledge of geography.

The members of the National Council for Geographic Education welcome your involvement in furthering your children's geographic education. We hope you and your children will enjoy learning about geography, both at home and at school as you follow the suggestions contained in this pamphlet.

Sincerely,

Ruth I. Shirey
Executive Director

Why is it important to learn geography?

Students in the U.S. know less about geography than students in other countries.

Surveys show that U.S. students' geography knowledge ranks far below that of students in such countries as Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. Even worse, geographical literacy has declined over the years, so now many children cannot read maps or locate states, cities, or important physical features, even in the United States. But, lack of geographic knowledge is not restricted to children; in 1992, 23 graduating Harvard University students were asked what causes seasons on the earth. Only two were able to say that the tilt of the earth with respect to the sun accounts for the seasons.

Lack of geographical knowledge is more than an embarrassment, it can affect the future of our country.

- How can citizens evaluate U.S. foreign policy options if they know nothing about the countries that are involved?
- How can we assess the merits of the North American Free Trade Agreements if we are unfamiliar with current U.S. trade patterns with Canada and Mexico?
- How do we know if U.S. troops should be sent to places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Haiti if we are ignorant of the land and people with whom they must deal?
- How can we develop opinions on such matters as conserving forests in the Pacific Northwest, limiting development of Mississippi River floodplains, or spending billions of dollars to clean up toxic waste dumps if we lack the basic knowledge of geography that is required to understand the issues that are involved?
- Concern over lack of geographical knowledge in the United States has been expressed by local, state, and national governments.
- Geography is included among the core subjects in the Federal Goals 2000 Legislation to improve U.S. education. As a result of this initiative and others, National Geography Standards have been developed and are being distributed around the country. These geography standards are benchmarks against which the content of geography courses at all grade levels can be measured. They will affect the education of all children in the United States.

How can you as a parent or caregiver help in the process of improving geographical literacy?

Get geographic materials for your home and keep them where they can be located easily for reference.

- Maps are the tools of the geographer. A world map and a map of the United States can be hung on the wall of your children's room or elsewhere in the home where they can be used easily and frequently. Maps are available in most bookstores.
- A globe is a useful reference item. Large, illuminated globes may cost hundreds of dollars, but a small, inexpensive inflatable globe that may be bought from many toy and novelty stores for under $10 will be just as effective as a large, solid one for helping a child see the proper shape and relationships of Earth's features.
- An atlas is the most comprehensive and useful geography reference work. Atlas maps allow children to locate countries, and physical and cultural features. Atlases also contain data on population, climates, economies, and many other factors that are important for understanding a country's place in the world.
- Almanacs contain a wealth of useful and interesting geographic information. These handy references can be purchased at bookstores, discount houses, and many other places for under $10. Some almanacs have small atlas inserts with political maps of the continents.
- Encyclopedias, atlases, almanacs, and geographic databases are now available in CD-ROM and other electronic formats. If your children have access to a computer, you may want to consider using this form of access to geographic reference works.
- Help your children learn to use maps, atlases, and globes. Work with your children to find places on the globe or look up information in the atlas or almanac. Be a good role model by consulting the atlas yourself (even if you already know where a place is, look it up so your children see that the atlas is used by adults as well as children). Encourage your children to keep references nearby to use as they study.

Relate Map, Atlas and Globe Use to Current Events

- When names of countries, cities, and other places appear on TV news, broadcasts or in newspapers and magazines, help your children to find the places or encourage them to find the places on a map, in the atlas, or on the globe. Reinforce the children's use of maps by congratulating them for learning about places.
- When a place is mentioned on TV or in the newspaper talk about it with your children. Look the place up together, discuss the important characteristics of the area, and try to bring out geographical relationships or important factors.

Make Geography a Family Activity

- If members of your family travel or if relatives live in distant places, have your children look up the places to be visited or where the relatives live and get information about them.
- If your family takes vacation trips, obtain a road map or highway atlas and have your children help plan the trip. If it is convenient, let your children help choose the vacation destination or select among possible routes. Ask your children to figure out how far you should travel each day, where the best stopping places are, what points of interest might be found along the way (and some background about them). Will you pass across a time zone boundary on the trip? How will the time change and why?
- If you are going to a special place such as a zoo, museum, or amusement park, let your children plot the route there on a street or road map.
- Play geographical games. Many "geographical" board games are available for children and families. If you are so inclined, playing these games with your children may help them to learn isolated facts and locations. However, commercial games are not necessary for learning geography. Spending fifteen minutes or half an hour a day or every other day asking questions from an atlas or wall map or taking turns with the children asking questions of the adult will probably be more effective in the long run as a learning strategy. For younger children, map puzzles of the United States are a good tool for beginning to learn the shapes and relative positions of the states.

Learn about Geography in Your Community

- **Look up your state, county, or city on a map. Ask the children to identify local landmarks such as rivers, mountains, water bodies, or nearby large cities.**
- If you live in a city, use a street map to learn about the geography of your neighborhood and other parts of the city. For rural areas, county road maps may serve a similar purpose.
- Learning first hand about local geography can be a source of very good learning experiences, especially for young children. As you travel to school, church, the store, or other frequently visited places ask the children to identify important landmarks along the way (public buildings, major streets and thoroughfares, parks, monuments or architecturally distinctive buildings).
- Have your children draw a sketch map of the route, locating the important landmarks seen along the way. The sketch map doesn't have to be geographically accurate; it may reflect your children's mental images of the route and the important places along it; it may not show all the places you think should be included. The important thing is that your children begin to learn the process of mapping a route. Be encouraging, regardless of the quality of the drawing or its accuracy. If the map has gross errors, gently help your children to improve the map's accuracy through questions or discussion.

Pen Pals Can Help Children Learn Geography

- **Urge your children to develop a pen pal relationship with someone in a foreign country or in another state.** Pen pals may trade geographical materials from each other's home area such as maps, tourist brochures, postcards, or stamps. Encourage your children to learn as much as possible from the pen pals about where they live and reciprocate with information about the area where you live. If your children have access to a computer with a modem, e-mail may be used to communicate with electronic pen pals.

Geography in the Schools

- **Take an active interest in your children's education. Visit the school and talk with teachers and the school principal.** Encourage school administrators to have up-to-date globes and atlases in every classroom. Find out if wall maps are available for teachers, if they are up to date, and if they are used in teaching geography and other subjects such as history, science, and economics.
- Are teachers properly trained to teach geography? If not, encourage the school administration to send them to workshops or short courses on geography teaching (each state and Canadian province has a geography alliance that conducts summer institutes on geography teaching. Information may be obtained through the National Council for Geographic Education or the National Geographic Society).
- If the school does not already participate in the National Geography Bee, the American Express Geography Competition, or other such contests, suggest their participation. Ask the school to plan special events for Geography Awareness Week, which occurs every November.
- See that students have meaningful homework assignments and make sure they are completed. Be positive about your children's school work (not just geography, but all of it). Congratulate your children for success; be helpful (not critical) with mistakes. Work with your children to correct problems; don't just say, "You have to do better."
- Ask if geography is brought into the teaching of other subjects (for example, science, literature, history, and social studies). It is fairly simple to point out elements of geography that are important to the study of other school subjects.
- Suggest that the schools develop student geography projects. Students may draw maps of places in the news or of the area around the school, make posters, displays, or models on geographical themes, or collect materials from different countries or states. For example, help your children write letters to embassies and tourist bureaus requesting brochures and posters (addresses may be obtained from phone directories, maps, and tour guides).
- Work through your Parent Teacher Association and school board to make geography a high priority. Learn about geography yourself and become familiar with how students learn geography. Encourage features about geographic information in the school newspaper, local newspapers, and TV stations.
- See that the school's geography students have an opportunity to compete for prizes in such contests as the National Geography Bee, the American Express Geography Competition, and the National Geography Olympiad. Let everyone know that geography is important to you.

For more information contact:

National Council for Geographic Education
16A Leonard Hall, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, PA 15705
Phone: 412/357-6290—Fax: 412/357-7708